

N^o 7

*The excellence of moral duties above
positive institutions.*

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED in

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FOR THE

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OF THE

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By *GEORGE BENSON.* *K*

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MAT. xii. part of the 7th verse.

I will have mercy and not sacrifice.---

IN matters of religion we ought to keep close to the appointment of GOD. But as, among the things which GOD hath commanded, all are not of equal importance, it highly concerns us to understand what stresse we ought to lay upon every part, that we may, in the most just and rational manner, comply with the will of GOD, and at last be happy in his favor.

The Pharisees were a superstitious sect among the Jews, who made great pretences to religion, and at the same time were immoral men. And (like superstitious persons of all ages and countries) they were guilty both of teaching for doctrines the commandments of men; and of laying the greatest stresse upon things of the least moment, in their observation of the laws of GOD.—They had certain traditional rules about washing their hands before they sat down to meat; and about washing of pots and cups and brazen vessels.

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vessels. And these they observed as matters of religion, while they neglected those moral precepts, which are of the highest importance. Again; They tithed mint, annise and cummin, and were very curious in proportioning the tithe of those small seeds and herbs. But, at the same time, they omitted the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, fidelity, and the love of GOD. Whereas *they ought to have done the one, and not have left the other undone.*

IN the beginning of the chapter where our text is, we find, they blamed the disciples of our Lord; because, as they walked thro' the corn fields on the sabbath day, they gathered some of the corn, rubbed out the ears, and eat them, to satisfy their hunger. It was not because the corn was another man's property: for it was one of the Jewish laws, *when thou comest into the standing-corn of thy neighbors, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle into thy neighbors standing-corn;** i. e. they were not to cut down and carry away a large quantity. But any Jew might have plucked the ears with his hands, and have eat what he had gathered in that manner. Those superstitious pharisees would have accounted that action of the apostles lawful on any other day; but as it was, they looked upon it as breaking the sabbath. Accordingly

* Deut. xxiii. 25.

ingly they said unto Jesus, *Behold, your disciples do that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath day.* Our Lord vindicated his disciples, because they were hungry and therefore had occasion to eat. So the hunger and present necessity of *David*, and the young men that were with him led the Priest to give them *the shew-bread*, which in other circumstances it would not have been lawful for them to eat.* But necessity had no law, and therefore *David* and his company, who were not priests, did in their pressing necessity eat of it without any blame. There is another reason assigned by our Lord, viz. *That the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath,*† or that such positive duties were enjoined for the use and benefit of man, and not man created that he might observe such positive institutions to his detriment, or when moral duties came in competition with them.—Again; The outward rest of the sabbath day was enjoined in the Jewish law. For *six days they were to labor and do all their work: but the seventh being the sabbath (or rest) of the Lord their God, they were not, on that day, to do any manner of work.* In that their law was very plain and expresse. And yet, whoever made use of his reason, in the interpretation of that law, must needs see that works of necessity and mercy were to be excepted, and that in

* 1 Sam. xxi. 6.

† Mark ii. 27.

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in such cases men ought to work. So the priests on that day slew the cattel, and labored very hard, in one of the courts of the temple, in preparing and offering the sacrifices required. And, tho' they profaned (or broke the outward rest of) the sabbath day, they were blamelesse, and did nothing but what was their duty to do. And, if the temple service excused them, *Jesus*, who was of greater excellence and dignity than the temple, could dispense with his disciples in that particular. And then come in the words of our text, *But if you had known what that expression meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltlesse.* Wherefore, * upon all these accounts, *The son of man is Lord of the sabbath day*, and can dispense with the outward rest of that day, in his disciples, in cases where it is proper, or when any good reason requires it.

The words of our text are a quotation from one of the antient prophets, where it is thus expressed. *For I desired mercy and not sacrifice,*

* That phrase, [*the son of man*,] doth, in the four gospels, never signifie *any man*, but is always (as I apprehend) to be understood of *Christ*. And the *use wherefore*, Mark ii. 28. denotes that what follows, is the general inference from all the arguments that had been mentioned, q. d. *Wherefore*, upon all these accounts, or for the reasons alleged, I (the son of man) can assure my disciples that they have done nothing amisse. For I have power to dispense with their observing the outward rest of this day, when I can assign so many and such good reasons for what they do.

above positive institutions. 7

*crifice, and the knowlege of GOD more than burnt-offering.** Our Lord made use of this passage at another time, to vindicate his own conduct. † The Pharisees pretended that to touch, or converse with, Publicans and other vitious persons, was contracting defilement, and rendered a religious person impure and polluted : Our Lord intimated that that positive injunction of their wise men was not to be regarded by him, who kept company with them in order to reform them ; *For GOD will have mercy and not sacrifice* ; or GOD regards the promoting good morals more than any ceremonial or positive injunctions.

GOD required *sacrifices* of the Jews, as well as *mercy*. But the *Hebrews*, very frequently, when they would expresse the comparative excellence of one thing above another, deny the one and assert the other ; and in this case represent GOD as saying, *I desired mercy and not sacrifice*. But we should expresse it in our language, after this manner, *I desired mercy rather than sacrifice* ; or, *I preferred mercy to sacrifice*. Tho' I required both ; yet I laid the greater stresse upon mercy ; and sacrifice was comparatively of lesse moment, being a thing that might, upon some occasions, be dispensed with, like the outward rest of the sabbath day. Whereas works of mercy are necessary, or ever-
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* Hos. vi. 6.

† Mat. ix. 13.

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more obligatory, and can never be dispensed with.

MERCY is one of the moral virtues, or one of the branches of everlasting righteousness: whereas *sacrifice* was appointed by positive institution. And, as our Lord extended that fine passage of the prophet's to the case of his disciples, to prove that they might lawfully, on the sabbath day, rub out the ears of corn, to satisfy their hunger, tho' they thereby broke the outward rest of that day;—so we may, by way of parity, extend it to all *moral duties* whatever; and from hence learn “to prefer such duties to all *positive institutions*.” But, as this is a subject of great moment, it may be highly proper to enter into a more particular consideration of it. For there are few things which more concern our practice as Christians. Some pretend that by *morality*, we are to understand external civility, or honesty, temperance and sobriety: that we must restrain morality to mere outward actions, without regarding the principles from which such actions flow; or that it concerns our duty towards men only, but does not take in our duty towards GOD also. Whereas *the sum of the moral law is to love the Lord our GOD with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.* i. e. it comprehends all the branches of righteousness,

ness, or true holiness. And, in this comprehensive sense, would I be understood all along, in this discourse, to make use of the words, *morality, the moral law, moral virtue, moral duties*, and the like. And would have you take particular notice and carefully remember, that by *morality* is to be understood *the loving the Lord our GOD with all our hearts, and our neighbor as ourselves*; or those duties which we owe to GOD, our neighbor and ourselves, as far as they are deducible from right reason, or the nature of things. But by *positive institutions*, we are to understand such duties as we could not have deduced from the reason and nature of things; but which are appointed of GOD, and discovered to us by revelation. And that such *moral duties* are of greater importance than *positive institutions*, will evidently appear from the following particulars,

- I. " *Moral virtue* (or true holiness) is in-
" joined both by *reason* and *scripture* :
" Whereas *positive duties* are enjoined by
" *scripture* alone."

Moral duties may not only be deduced from the reason and nature of things, or from the several relations in which we stand to GOD or men; but they are likewise commanded of GOD in *scripture*, and there enforced by the divine authority. Whereas our

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obligation to observe positive institutions takes its rise from the divine authority, and could be known no otherwise than by revelation. Now, where there is greater light and evidence, concerning any part of our duty, and more obligations to practise it, there a greater stress ought certainly to be laid upon it. This, I think, we may justly infer from the known wisdom and goodness of almighty God. For, as he cannot be thought to require as much from him, who had no such opportunity of knowing his will, as from him who knows, or may know, it; so he cannot be thought to require that an equal stress should be laid upon any part of his will, where he himself has not laid an equal stress.

Moral virtue (or everlasting righteousness) he requires twice, or upon two accounts, by *reason* and by his own *authority*, declared in scripture. But what is *positive* is enjoined by the divine *authority* alone. The moral law is founded upon the eternal, unalterable reason and fitness of things, and might have been found out, by a careful, impartial inquiry, without a revelation; it being *that law, which* (as St. Paul expresses it) *is written upon men's hearts*; * and by which their consciences are led to applaud them, when they do well; and to accuse them, when they do wickedly. But the most fair and sagacious

* Rom. ii. 15.

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ous inquirer could not, with the utmost diligence, have discovered his obligation to just such particular positive institutions, unlesse the divine being had signified it by revelation.

- II. “ *Positive duties* are all instrumental, and
“ have the nature of means to an end :
“ but holiness, or moral virtue, is that
“ end itself.”

There are, indeed, some means enjoined us by the light of nature ; such as study and attention, prayer and praise ; and these may be called the necessary or natural means. But the positive institutions of Christianity are also means, well calculated to promote piety, universal, fervent charity, and every moral virtue. In holiness we resemble God, the most perfect and amiable being ; and therein consists our highest glory and perfection. But, in the observation of positive duties, we bear little or no resemblance to God. Moral virtue was good and excellent in itself, antecedent to all positive laws, and therefore enjoined upon us and upon the whole rational world. Whereas positive institutions are not good in themselves, but good only as means to holiness, which is the great end of all. And were it not for their subservience to that end, God would never have given us any positive injunctions. They, therefore, must in consequence be of com-

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paratively lesse value than the moral virtues which they were designed to promote; as the means are, in all cases, of lesse value than the end. The weightier matters of the law of *Moses* were not sacrifices, or tithing of mint, annise and cummin; but the great moral duties, which are of everlasting obligation, justice, mercy, fidelity, and the love of GOD.

Weak and bad men have frequently placed religion in the bare use of the means, without a proper care to become holier and better by them. But such a behavior is highly unreasonable in itself, as well as greatly displeasing to almighty GOD. When the wicked Jews offered numerous and costly sacrifices, GOD himself asked them these pungent questions, *Who hath required these things at your hands? Or, ordered such persons, as you are, to tread my courts? And then he adds, Bring no more vain oblations: incense is an abomination to me; the new-moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new-moons and your appointed feasts, my soul hateth; they are a trouble to me. I am weary with bearing them: And, when you spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you. Yea, when you make many prayers, I will not bear.** The reason of these grievous complaints is added, *Your hands are full of blood.* They

* Isa. i. 11, — 15.

They were murtherers and oppressors, and therefore all their zeal about rites and ceremonies, and even such positive institutions as GOD had commanded, was disregarded and abhorred of GOD. But, as the prophet goes on to tell them, if they would reform, then GOD would yet be gracious and accept them, "*Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, saith the Lord; cease to do evil, learn to do well; and then all your sins, of how deep a die soever, will be pardoned, and you shall have the divine blessing.*" The same thing is elsewhere inculcated; *Unto this man (says GOD) will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word.* But, as to other men, who disobey my word, *He that killeth a bullock, with a view to offer it in sacrifice upon mine altar, is as odious to me as if he murthered a man: he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol.* The reason is added, *Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations.* * — As the means are, in all cases, of lesse importance than the end, so are *positive institutions* of lesse importance than *moral duties*; because

* Isa. lxvi. 2, 3. See also Jer. vii. 22. Micah vi. 6, 7, 8.

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cause positive institutions have only the nature of means to an end. Whereas holiness, or moral virtue, is that end itself.

III. “ *Positive institutions* are of finite, or
“ limited duration ; but *moral virtue* (or
“ true holiness) is unchangable, and will
“ be everlasting. And this is another
“ thing whereby the superior excellence
“ of the latter may appear.”

The positive laws of GOD have actually been varied, according to the different circumstances in which mankind have been placed. In paradise, our first parents were commanded to abstain from the fruit of one tree, in token of their subjection to GOD, and as an acknowledgement that they held all they had by grant from him. But, besides that positive injunction, they had also the moral law written upon their hearts, as their general rule of conduct. After the fall, sacrifices seem to have been of divine appointment. For I can hardly think that *righteous Abel* would ever have attempted to please GOD, by slaying a brute beast and offering it up to him ; unless GOD had, some way or other, intimated his will concerning it. Much less would GOD have had respect unto *Abel* and to his offering, if he himself had not commanded it. He would rather have

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have testified against it, as superstition and will-worship.

In about ten generations after the flood, men degenerated into *idolatry*, as well as many other vices. And God gave a law to *Israel*, which abounded with rites and ceremonies and positive institutions; all which were highly proper at that time, and appointed of God with great wisdom, to be a standing monument against the customs of the surrounding, idolatrous nations; to keep the *Israelites* imployed in the service of the true God; to point out, by way of emblem, their obligations to moral purity; and to lead them to, or prepare them for, Christ Jesus and his religion, which St. Paul has called, *the end of the law for righteousness unto every one that believed*. But, when the Christian revelation was given, as a more excellent preservative, in that state of the world, against idolatry and vice; then the ceremonial law was laid aside, *As a yoke upon the necks of the disciples, which neither their fathers nor they were able to bear.* * Some parts of the *Jewish* law were very expensive, and others very burthensome. Our Savior therefore hath, with great wisdom and singular goodnesse to us, abolished the ceremonial law, and hath set up his law, contained in the New Testament, of which the positive institutions make but a very small part, being

* Acts xv. 10.

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being few in number, easy to be understood and observed, not pompous, not expensive or burthensome, no way tending to, or encouraging of, superstition; but, if carefully kept to, guarding men against it. The positive institutions of Christianity are these two, *Baptism* and the *Lord's Supper*. By *Baptism* we are initiated into the church of Christ, being charged with all the obligations, and intitled to all the privileges of his disciples. The washing with water denotes that purity of mind and life, which is required of every Christian. And, as we have been, in this solemn manner, initiated into that religion, which God, the Father of all, sent his Son from heaven to publish, and which he sealed and confirmed by the miraculous gifts of the spirit, we ought to use the greatest care and diligence to understand the Christian doctrine, and to live accordingly. *The Lord's Supper* is a memorial of Christ's dying love, designed to perpetuate the remembrance of some important facts, upon which the truth of Christianity depends; and to excite in our minds the sincerest love to Jesus Christ and to one another, as his members or followers. Hereby we are induced to abound in all the virtues of an holy and good life, and to behave in that exemplary manner which becomes those that are duely affected at the remembrance of the astonishing love of Christ in dying for us.

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These are the *positive institutions* of pure and uncorrupt Christianity. But, since the first planting of this religion, many errors and corruptions have crept into the Christian church; and (among other things) the number of rites and ceremonies hath swelled to an amazing degree, not by the appointment of God, but by the mere contrivance and invention of weak or corrupt men. And the *church of Rome*, more especially, hath rendered them very numerous and burthensome. But from what has been said you may see, that many positive institutions, which were of divine appointment, ended together with that dispensation of which they were a part. And the positive institutions of Christianity will end, at the furthest, with the present state of things. For, tho' Christianity be the last dispensation of Grace, yet it must give way to the kingdom of Glory. Then will all the ordinances of the gospel cease, and the use of the present means be intirely over. But, as moral virtue (or everlasting righteousness) has been the same in all past ages, so will it continue to be in all the ages to come, and will never cease or vanish away, but will accompany us into the unseen world, be found to be the very temper of heaven itself, and will there be our glory and happiness for ever. Like *tongues* and *prophecie*, *faith* and *hope*, will all positive institutions vanish. But *charity*, and all the other moral virtues,

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will abide with us world without end. And this is another reason why we should prefer *moral duties* to *positive institutions*. For that, which will abide, hath certainly a greater glory than that which is to vanish away. When the building is completed, the scaffolding is removed as no longer of any use. And, in every case, where the end is fully and completely attained, the means are no longer of any value. It is only in this state of trial that such helps are useful ; when we come into the happy state of recompence, we shall want such helps and institutions no longer.

- IV. “ Tho’ our obligation to positive duties
“ is derived from the will of GOD, yet
“ they are not in themselves things wholly
“ arbitrary or indifferent ; but were ap-
“ pointed of GOD with great wisdom
“ and goodnesse.”

The will of GOD is always according to the reason and fitnessse of things, and he commands nothing merely for commanding sake, or purely to make trial of our obedience. Without such, there are commands enow to imploy our whole time and care ; and many and powerful temptations sufficient to trie our virtue and obedience. And GOD, the wise, the gracious governor of all, will never act the part of a tyrant,
or

or arbitrary governor, towards any of his intelligent creatures. For, as such arbitrary commands would be of little or no service, on the one hand; so, on the other hand, they might prove of disservice, as disobedience to them would increase our guilt, and aggravate our condemnation.

Weak and designing men have been apt to confound arbitrary and positive injunctions, as if they were intirely the same thing: Whereas they are altogether distinct things, and ought by no means to be confounded. For *arbitrary laws* there can be no reason assigned, but the mere will, or humor, of him that appointed them. But for *positive institutions* God saw sufficient reason, before he enjoined men to observe them. And, tho' men could not discover their obligations, nor see the reasonableness of them, antecedent to the divine appointment; yet, now they are commanded, and the design of them plainly laid before us, we may clearly perceive that they are very far from being arbitrary, or unreasonable. They are calculated to excite useful reflections, and lead us to a proper course of action, which was the wise and gracious design of God in appointing them. They are as food to nourish our souls in virtue, and true goodness; or like physic, to heal the diseases of our souls, which are liable to be disordered by the temptations that abound in the world.

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We are sensible, as well as rational creatures, and what affects the senses commonly attracts our regard more strongly than the objects of reason, or understanding. It is, therefore fit that, by some sensible representations, our minds be called off from a too great regard to temporal things ; that we may consider what we are, in what relations we stand, how far we are pursuing the end of our creation, and of our being planted for a few years upon earth ; whether we are doing our duty, and performing the main business for which we were sent into the world ; — that we may rectify what is amiss, and strengthen those habits which are wise and good.

There are some considerable advantages in God's appointing *positive institutions* : For hereby superstition and will-worship is prevented, or detected : seeing their manner is determined, their number limited, and the nature and design of them is clearly described and ascertained. It is almost incredible how much the *Priests of the church of Rome* have captivated the minds of the people by magnificent buildings, splendid vestments, enchanting music, and numberless rites and ceremonies of mere human invention ; by which means they have carried on their own covetous and aspiring views, and raised themselves to immense riches and great worldly dominion and grandeur. But the progress of virtue and true piety has been thereby greatly

greatly obstructed ; and ignorance, superstition, idolatry and vice have been maintained and promoted. Whereas, in *the gospel*, purity and simplicity are altogether consulted. There the *moral law* is enjoined by divine authority, and such *positive institutions* added, as promote men's regard to that law. For, tho' before or without such divine appointment, our reason laid us under no obligation to observe such things ; yet, now they are reveled, they appear to be laws highly worthy both of the wisdom and of the goodness of God.

- V. " Tho' *positive institutions* are not equal
" to moral duties, yet it would be ridiculous, nay wicked, upon that account,
" to despise or neglect them."

Tho' tithing mint, annise and cummin was not equal to the weightier matters of the law of *Moses*, *judgment*, *mercy*, *fidelity*, and the *love of GOD* ; yet neither of them were to be omitted. *These things you ought to have done*, (says our Savior) *and not left the other undone*. Tho' *sacrifices* were not of equal importance with *mercy*, yet the *Jews* were commanded to offer sacrifice, as well as to shew mercy. When God commands any thing, it no longer remains an indifferent matter, whether men regard it or no. But he is guilty of *immorality* who, thro' contempt

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contempt or neglect, observeth not the *positive institutions*, which God hath graciously appointed as helps to virtue and piety. For King *Saul's* disobeying a positive precept, the prophet *Samuel* reproveth him, when he declared "rebellion [*against GOD*] to be "as odious as the sin of witchcraft, and "stubborneſſe to be like injustice and idolatry."*—There are some, who acknowledge *Baptism* to be a standing ordinance in the Christian church, and yet live and die unbaptized. There are many more professed Christians, who have been baptized, and yet neglect the observation of *the Lord's Supper*; notwithstanding it was Christ's dying command to all his followers, *This do in remembrance of me*. They would do well to consider whether they pay a due regard to Christ's authority, and how they will answer it to him, when they stand before his tribunal in the last day, and he shall demand of them, "Why they have not complied "with that dying request and injunction of "his?" I am afraid they will be speechless and confounded before their Judge at his coming.—Such divine institutions are highly proper, especially at this distance of time and place, to preserve the Christian name and religion in the world. Miracles are ceased long ago; but a standing church is instituted to preserve and maintain the know-
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* 1 Sam. xv. 23.

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lege of Christianity in the world, *to edifie the body of Christ*, and to train men up, in piety and virtue, for a better state. Now a visible church without *positive institutions* is a mere creature of the imagination.* The observation, therefore, of positive institutions is necessary to preserve and continue the Christian name and religion in the world. Nor let any persons plead "that they have attained to an equal measure of holiness without the use of such means." For, as that would be false in fact, so would it be, in effect, an arraigning the wisdom of God, who appointed those means, and a contradicting the experience of some of the best of mankind, who have found great benefit from the use of such institutions. Whoever would act like a rational creature, and a Christian, must neither rest in the *means*, as if they were the *end*; nor neglect the use of them, because they are of less value than the end. The right way is *to do the one, and not leave the other undone.*

It is laudable in you to keep holy the Lord's day, to hear the word of God, and not to forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of too many is in our day. But, tho' you hear never so many sermons, and have the clearest knowledge of divine things; yet, if you rest in the bare hearing the word, and are not doers,† as well
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* See Bishop Butler's *Analogy*, &c.

† James i. 22.

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as hearers, you greatly deceive yourselves, and cannot profit thereby. — You have been devoted unto GOD in Christ by baptism, and laid under early and lasting obligations to all that purity which the Christian religion requires. But what will your baptism profit you, unlesse you renounce the sins of a wicked world, and keep the holy will and commandments of GOD, as long as you live? You have (several of you) been lately at the table of the Lord, and there eat and drank in memory of Christ's dying love. But what can it avail you, in that solemn manner, to shew forth his death 'till he return as judge; if you be not constrained, by the love of Christ, to live unto him who died for you and rose again? You pray to GOD in the name of Jesus Christ; [I hope you do so in your families and in your closets, as well as in the house of GOD;] but is your temper and practice agreeable? Do you consider that *the prayer of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the holy and upright man is his delight? We know that GOD beareth not sinners; but, if any man be a worshiper of GOD, and doth his will, him he beareth. He that offereth praise glorifieth GOD, and unto him that ordereth his conversation aright shall be shewn the salvation of the Lord.*

But, tho' holinesse of heart and life, the love of GOD and our neighbor, the regulation

lation of our passions and appetites, be the great end of religious worship, and therefore preferable to it; yet religious worship is by no means to be neglected. Tho' renouncing the sins of a wicked world and leading an holy life is of much more importance than *baptism*, or washing of the body with water; yet *baptism* is not to be neglected. Tho' spiritual union and communion with Christ and his disciples is of much more moment than the bare eating bread and drinking wine in *the Lord's Supper*; yet every professed Christian ought, by all means, to attend upon that sacred ordinance, in order to promote moral virtue, or holiness of heart and life. And would to God that that dying command of our Lord's were more universally observed!

[VI. Lastly.] “*Tho' positive institutions*
“ought not by any means to be slighted,
“but most religiously observed, when
“time and place, and all other circumstances will allow us to make use of
“them; yet *moral duties* ought always to
“be preferred, whenever they come in
“competition.”

The lesse weighty matters of the law ought unquestionably to give place to the more weighty; and therefore *mercy* is more acceptable unto God than *sacrifice*, and obedience

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dience to the moral precepts of more account than whole burnt-offerings. Accordingly, our Savior, who was borne under the law of *Moses*, and obliged to fulfil all righteousness, did frequently prefer *moral* duties to *positive*, very commonly choosing to work cures on the sabbath day, and vindicating himself, in not observing the outward rest of that day, by the practice of the Jews in general, who took care of their cattel on that day, and were right in so doing. Thus, when health and all other circumstances will allow, it is your duty to hear the word of GOD, to keep holy the Lord's day, and to attend at the table of the Lord ; but, suppose your life or health would be thereby indangered, or some other great evil follow, or some greater good could be done at that time, which could not be done at any other time ; in such a case, GOD has declared, *he would have mercy rather than sacrifice*, or that he prefers *moral* to *positive* duties. But, generally speaking, these two kinds of duties do not come in competition. And, in all such cases, *you ought to do the one, and not leave the other undone.*

TO CONCLUDE : What I aim at, is, to give every duty of the Christian life its proper weight, and place it in its due order. To lay a different stress upon any part from what GOD has laid upon it, would be to misrepresent the divine will, and give an
handle

handle to superstitious or profane men to abuse or pervert it. But to represent means only as means, on the one hand, and to teach men not to expect to attain the end as well without them, on the other hand, would be to set Christianity in the most clear, rational and amiable light; and be the most effectual method of putting the infidels to silence, and of settling the minds of all that are in earnest in their religious inquiries. And I am well persuaded that there is no way that can equally promote the glorious cause of truth and righteousness, and consequently of the happiness of mankind;—in order to promote which, any good man would desire to live, and some would even dare to die.

From what has been said thus far in general, we may observe, (1.) In what manner the children of this charity-school, and all children ought to be educated.

2. That those, who are engaged in so good a work, as supporting this charity-school, have motives sufficient to encourage them to procede with zeal and vigor.

1. As to the manner in which children ought to be educated. — *As mercy is, in God's account, more acceptable than sacrifice,* they should have this lesson instilled into them

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them upon all occasions. *The church of Rome* (in opposition to whose pernicious principles this school was first erected) abounds in rites and ceremonies of mere human invention. The children under your care are brought up in very different principles: For they are not only allowed, but enjoined, to read the scriptures, to see with their own eyes, and to learn religion from the fountain of sacred truth. It ought to be the care of such as instruct them, deeply to impress upon their tender minds a serious and constant regard for GOD and religion. They should teach them never to forsake the public worship of almighty GOD, as long as they live; that it is their duty to pray to GOD in the name of *Jesus Christ*; that, when they grow up, it is required of them, as Christians, that they devote themselves unto GOD in Christ Jesus, at the table of the Lord; and that they ought not to neglect any of the means which are of divine appointment! But they should also be told, once and again, that *mercy is more acceptable unto GOD than sacrifice*; that it signifies nothing to worship GOD, if they continue to live in any vice; that moral virtue, or holiness of heart and life, is the great end of all religious institutions and observances whatever; that they do not love GOD, unless they keep his commandments; that they do not love their neighbors as themselves, unless

unlesse they do unto every one as, in like circumstances, they could reasonably desire that others should do unto them. Children should be taught, from the first opening of their understandings, to pay the greatest regard to the dictates of their own consciences; that all the passions, appetites and affections are wisely planted in them, by the hand of GOD; but that they ought to be kept constantly under the controul and direction of *conscience*; that they are obliged *to do justice and love mercy*, as well as worship and *walk humbly with GOD*. Such an education will make them better servants, more useful members of society, better supports and greater ornaments to the church of GOD; and (in one word) more valuable in all relations and circumstances whatever. I suppose your design is not to train them up above their circumstances, but to render them useful in the lower stations of life. Methinks, it might be of service to this end, if you could find out some bodily labor, suited to their ages and circumstances, in which to imploy them some hours every day, as well as at proper intervals to teach them to read and write. We are told of some instances of this kind, both in *Scotland* and *Ireland*, which seem to promise very happy effects.

2. " Those,

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2. “ Those, who are engaged in so good a
“ work, as supporting this charity-school,
“ have motives sufficient to encourage
“ them to proceed with zeal and vigor.”

Our poor are a very important part of the nation, and they are great benefactors to the public, who endeavor to render them more orderly and useful. They have souls to be saved, as well as the rich, and you are consulting at once both for their temporal and everlasting good, and taking the most effectual methods to hand down virtue and religion to ages yet to come. Our Lord has well observed, *it is more blessed to give than to receive*. And, amidst all the threatening symptoms from enthusiasm, on the one hand; from infidelity and open contempt of religion, on the other hand; and from a too general prevalence of vice, on all hands;—it is a most agreeable and encouraging thought, that there are such numbers of persons in plentiful circumstances, who are ready to engage in works of extensive charity and usefulness; who concern themselves in behalf of the fatherless and widows, and such as have none to help them; who stand up for the cause of truth and liberty, piety and righteousness in the earth; who deal out their substance with a liberal hand, in the most

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most noble, generous and disinterested acts of benevolence and charity.

You, who are at present engaged, plainly manifest by your actions that you judge right, and that *you prefer mercy to sacrifice*. You do not spend all your zeal about speculative and abstruse notions, or ritual and positive institutions ; but show that you look upon all religious observances as subordinate to moral virtue and everlasting righteousness. You are not (like many) for a religion which is to cost you nothing ; but you are for taking in all the branches of your duty : And, indeed, you could not otherwise hope for acceptance with God. No man should condemn riches, any more than any other temporal blessings ; but every one should labor to acquire them, as far as he can, by honest industry and moderate care ; that he may avoid being burthensome to others, and have somewhat to give to those who are in distress. And, in a decent proportion to their circumstances, the hands and hearts of Christians should be open, and they should be ready to every good work. There is a fitness and propriety in doing good, in being friends to the distressed, and promoting the happiness of all around us. For we are all members of society, and borne for the public good. There is also a most pure, sublime and lasting pleasure attends the performance of acts of benevolence and charity.—You are not, indeed,

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indeed, *innocent* ; and therefore cannot pretend to *merit* : but, if you are prevaillingly holy in the rest of your temper and conduct, your charity will turn to the best account to yourselves, and you are a laying up the richest treasure against the time to come. For, tho' these poor children cannot recompence you, yet you shall be amply recompenced in the resurrection of the just. There is a day approaching, when such generous and disinterested actions shall not be forgot ; but be brought upon the stage, and applauded before the whole world, and then they will meet with the most abundant reward. Upon such motives (one would hope) others would come in, and join the present subscribers and managers. And I should be particularly pleased that some young persons would ingage in so noble and desirerable a work.

The present State of the School.

" *The foundation of this school was laid*
" *in the year 1687, in the reign of King*
" *James the second, when a school was set*
" *up by one Poulton, a Jesuit ; and public*
" *notice given, that he would instruct the*
" *children of the poor gratis. Upon which*
" *Mr. Arthur Shallet, Mr. Samuel Warbur-*
" *ton, and Mr. Ferdinando Holland, all*
" *members of this church, in the reverend*
" *Mr.*

above positive institutions. 33

" Mr. Nathaniel Vincent's time, laid the
" foundation of this school, to avoid the dan-
" gerous consequences of a Popish school, and
" to provide for the instruction of the poor
" in the Protestant way.

" The number of scholars at first was
" forty, afterwards increased to fifty, and
" now to one hundred and forty. They are
" taught to read, write and cypher, and are
" also instructed in the Assembly's Catechism,
" and thereby qualified for the service of
" God and man.

" It may be said to be the first school the
" Protestant Dissenters were concerned in.
" Here (to the great honor of the managers)
" objects are received, without distinction of
" parties; the general good being intended.
" It is situated in one of the poorest parts
" about the city; and the children of the
" poorest sort of watermen, fishermen and
" others, are here taught, without any ex-
" pence to their parents; and are furnished
" with bibles, testaments, catechisms, wri-
" ting books and cyphering books.

" The charges have been defrayed by the
" gifts and subscriptions of private persons,
" with an annual collection in this place, on
" this day; and one in the city; together with
E " the

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*“ the kind remembrance of the said school, by
“ some in their last wills.”*

By this state of the school it appears that it has increased from 40 to 50, and, since that, to 140 scholars. Let not the zeal of your worthy predecessors sink ; come not short of their virtues. The work is excellent in itself, and useful to society, and to the church of Christ. And how glorious will it appear, when the present scene is over, and the state of retribution commences ? How will the heart of every faithful Christian, and charitable, good man glow within his breast, when the great and venerable judge shall place him on his right hand, in the most public manner to do him honor, and shall say unto him, “ Come you blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you, from the foundation of the world. You fed the hungry, you clothed the naked. And, inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, I take it as kindly, and will reward it as graciously, as if you had it done it unto me myself, in my own person.”

Whereas they, who have been able, and yet neglected all acts of piety and charity, shall be placed on the left hand, and the judge will say unto them, “ Depart from me, ye cursed, &c. You have refused to
“ do

above positive institutions. 39

“ do acts of mercy and charity ; and, in-
“ asmuch as ye did them not unto one of
“ the least of these my brethren, ye did
“ them not unto me ; or I resent it as
“ much, and will punish you as severely,
“ as if you had refused to do them to me,
“ in my own person.” Upon which the
uncharitable and all the wicked shall go a-
way into everlasting punishment ; but the
righteous and charitable into everlasting life
and happinesse, there to reflect with the
highest satisfaction upon their acts of bene-
ficence and goodnesse, which they performed
here upon earth, and to enjoy the glorious
reward thereof thro’ the endlesse ages of
eternity, *Amen.*

F I N I S.

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